

# United Arab Emirates launches national space agency strategy

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Emirati and other visitors visit the Space Museum during the launch of the UAE Space Agency strategic plan in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, Monday, May 25, 2015. The agency on Monday laid out a strategic framework for a newly created space agency that aims to integrate various arms of the Gulf federation's burgeoning space industry. The announcement comes less than three weeks after the Dubai-based team behind a 2020 mission to Mars announced that its probe will circle the planet studying its atmosphere, including changes over time and how surface features such as volcanoes, deserts and canyons affect it. (AP Photo/Kamran Jebreili)

The United Arab Emirates on Monday laid out a strategic framework for a newly created space agency that aims to integrate various arms of the Gulf federation's burgeoning space industry.

The seven-state federation, perhaps best known for its oil wealth and extravagant attractions like Dubai's palm-shaped islands and the record-breaking Burj Khalifa skyscraper, is fast establishing itself as the Arab world's leader in the space sector.

The UAE Space Agency, created last year by presidential decree, aims to regulate and support the industry, which includes existing Earth-orbiting satellite programs and plans for a mission to Mars in 2020.

Agency Chairman Khalifa Mohammed Thani al-Rumaithi said the space industry will help diversify the country's economy and create highly skilled jobs for a growing youth population.

"The United Arab Emirates is seeking to confirm its status as a spacefaring nation," he told a gathering at an event rolling out the federal body in the capital, Abu Dhabi, that featured models of Emirati satellites and waiters serving space-themed canapés, like hummus in metal squeeze tubes.

Space technology is one of several high-tech industries the OPEC member is championing as a way to broaden an economy still heavily dependent on oil.

Thuraya, an Emirates-based satellite phone operator, was responsible for the country's first commercial satellite, launched in 2000.



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The Emirates' first government-backed satellite, an Earth-observation satellite known as DubaiSat-1, blasted into orbit atop a Russian rocket launched from Kazakhstan in 2009. It and the follow-up DubaiSat-2 were collaborations between Emirati engineers and a South Korean satellite firm.

Abu Dhabi's Al Yah Satellite Communications Co., better known as

Yahsat, hopes to put its third satellite into orbit in 2016. Its first communications satellite was launched aboard an Arianespace rocket from French Guiana in 2011.

Among the initiatives outlined Monday were plans for an academic space program involving Yahsat, Abu Dhabi's Masdar Institute and U.S. aerospace firm Orbital ATK, as well as the establishment of a space research center.

Earlier this month, the Dubai-based team behind the Emirati mission to Mars announced that its probe will circle the planet studying its atmosphere, including changes over time and how surface features such as volcanoes, deserts and canyons affect it.

Dubai ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum said earlier this month that he hoped the probe, named "Hope," would provide inspiration for the Arab world. It is the first Mars mission being attempted by any Arab country. Some 75 Emirati engineers are currently working on the Mars project, and officials hope to double that number by 2020.

The Emirates has pursued other space-related projects.



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Aabar Investments, which is backed by the Abu Dhabi government, is a key investor in Richard Branson's space tourism company, Virgin Galactic.

It agreed to pump \$280 million into the space startup in 2009 in exchange for a third of the company, and later raised its stake after agreeing to additional funding for the development of a satellite launch

program. Its initial deal called for the development of a spaceport in Abu Dhabi.

The space agency's director general, Mohammed Nasser al-Ahbabi, told The Associated Press that the Virgin Galactic investment does not fall under the scope of his agency for now, but he welcomed further investment in the field.

"We as a space agency support the idea that the UAE needs to be a hub for space," he said.

Virgin Galactic's plans are now uncertain after its experimental rocket ship, SpaceShipTwo, broke apart in flight over California's Mojave Desert in November.

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